

Woman The Mystery

By HENRY HERMAN

CHAPTER VIII.

It was early in the morning, one spring day of the year of grace, 1801, when a rather short, thick-set man, whose sparkling teeth were hidden behind a huge black mustache, and whose black beard was cut in the Vandike style, with all the precision of a Parisian dandy, though he was dressed only in a stained and well-worn pair of gray linen trousers and a ragged blue flannel shirt, was engaged in taking down the shutters of the Hotel de Paris, facing the levee of New Orleans.

The Hotel de Paris was a small, two-story building, which seemed so thin and puny between its two four-story neighbors that one might have imagined some body had found it in quite another spot, and had maliciously dropped it into its place to fill up the gap. It was brightly discolored in a salmon pink, and the green shutters and green window blinds gave it a cheerful aspect, to which the flaring signboard, adorned with the legend, "John Roberts, Proprietor," in gold letters on a green ground, added considerably.

Just then the rather unsteady and uneven tramp of many steps resounded on the broad stone steps, and a company of the newly enrolled Louisiana State Volunteers, in gray uniforms with red cordons, came marching by in open order carrying their converted Brown Bess muskets in any manner from the "trail" to the "right shoulder shift," singing "Away Down in Dixie," and looking for all the world as if no thought of a possible death on the battlefield found a place in their minds.

The short, dark man, who had been watching the soldiers pass by, shrugged his shoulders in disapproval of their undisciplined gait, and grunted impatiently as he dragged the heavy shutters from their places. This portion of his work being over, Monsieur Henri Salton—for it was he—sat himself down on a wooden stool and looked about him like a man dazed by his exertions.

He had been sitting on the stool for the space of about five or six minutes, when a sharp, scowling face appeared at the top of a small staircase, a face as bearded as his own, but with the difference that the hair was of a coarse red of various shades.

"Look here, Henri," cried a rasping voice, "what on earth are you up to now? Are you going to kick your legs about all day? And the red-bearded man, dressed in linen trousers and a flannel shirt only, came with slippers on his feet, and stood facing Henri with his arms crossed over his chest. "What do you think I brought you here for?" he asked, with a sneer of disgust. "Do you think it was to eat sponge cake?"

"No," growled Monsieur Henri Salton, in reply to Mr. Quayle, for he was the gentleman who had resumed his old patronymic of John Roberts. "You not bring me for sponge cake. You bring me for clean knives, scrub floor all day, all night. You bring me for fight ven sailor call you 'def' and make you eye black vis zrowing orster can. I rebel, I clean knife no more. I scrub floor no more. Negro cheap. You buy negro, clean knife, scrub floor. I go bed."

"You ungrateful sweep," said Mr. Quayle, with slow, hissing emphasis. "Where would you be now if I had not taken pity on you?"

"Me?" retorted Henri, defiantly. "In Paris. You come here, and zere are cafe concerts in Paris."

"Yes," rejoined Mr. Quayle, "there are cafe concerts, and there are also police, and a nice figure you'd cut—you, an escaped convict. They'd have you by the neck before you were up to many of your larks. Thank your stars you are with me, and be grateful."

"Grateful?" nearly yelled Henri. "Vat for grateful?"

"I'll tell you what you ought to be grateful for," hissed Mr. Quayle. "You ought to be grateful to me for teaching you the beastly English you are speaking. You ought to be grateful to me for allowing you to share with me when we believed that cunning Dutchman of his two thousand three hundred dollars."

"Yes," interrupted Henri, "two thousand three hundred. You take zousan five under. You give me eight under. I are nothing. You buy hotel. You boss. You 'ave all you want. I scrub floor, clean knife, take down shutter."

At this outburst Mr. Quayle thought it politic to change his demeanor. He became friendly, changing the subject and saying: "Confusion to that villain Adams, who sent us to slavery in the galleys."

"Dear to sat pig Adams!" exclaimed Henri, with great fervor. "We vill make of 'im food for dogs, I swear!"

"And death to that wretched 'bussy through whom we were sent to the galleys," Quayle went on.

Henri, in fact, she had altered in the intervening years, and from a comparatively unpromising girlhood had developed into a glorious woman. Tall, straight as a lance, she sat on her horse as if she had been born on it. Her figure had ripened and rounded, and her face had the charm which makes men's pulses sing, though perhaps no single feature could have claimed ideal perfection. But the eyes, those deep-blue eyes, which glittered with a sheen that no man might have explained, fastened themselves upon the beholder and were not to be forgotten.

Henri was engaged in a lively conversation with the gentleman riding by her side, and Henri gripped Quayle's arm so fiercely that the hotelkeeper dragged himself away with a sharp cry.

"Is she not beautiful?" said Henri. "Yes, confound her!" replied Quayle. "There is no question about that. You will not allow that to stand between her and our purpose, will you now?" he questioned, angrily. "You won't forget all we have endured through her—the years of torture, the years in chains, the years of lives of dogs?"

Henri's eyes still followed the column which was marching past in a steady, even tramp, tramp, tramp.

"I wish she not so beautiful!" he ejaculated.

CHAPTER IX.

The threatening shadow of the war cloud, daily and hourly expected to burst its fury over the Southern States, had transformed a peaceful grove into a camp of armed men. Steel flashed in the summer sun between the dark green of the cypress and the paler verdure of the laurel bushes. Rows of white tents stretched in even lines in the open space made mainly by the red and blue uniforms which occupied them.

The main portion of the Louisiana Zouaves was composed of boys barely out of their teens, but in addition to this raw material, the battalion embodied in its ranks a very considerable number of old French soldiers. Col. Adams was proud of his men, and only that very day had taken especial elation in showing their proficiency to no less a person than an officer of the United States regulars—a possible enemy, in fact—to his cousin, Capt. Denon.

Capt. Denon was on leave of absence from his command far out West in the wilds of Kansas. He had been slightly wounded in an action with the Apaches, and, having been furloughed, had come to the city, little dreaming that by the time he arrived there he would find the townsmen arrayed against the authority to whom he had sworn allegiance.

Adams' plantation was only divided from the camp of his regiment by a thick copse of magnolias, then in the pride of their spring bloom, which perfumed the air with the sweetest scent of any tree in the wide, wide world. The house itself was a straggling erection, mostly of one story only, but standing upon a space large enough for a small village.

Adams was seated in the welcome shade of the awning over the porch with a little writing table in front of him, piled high with papers of all kinds. Opposite him sat Walter Graydes, dressed in the dark blue, gold-braided uniform of a lieutenant in the Louisiana Zouaves.

Walter had changed but little physically since the day when he was so grievously wounded. He had allowed his beard to grow, and his face had become bronzed by exposure to a Southern sun, but beyond that he still looked the hale and stalwart young fellow who had fought against the reds in Paris.

Kindly Nature and a healthy constitution had repaired all his hurts except the one which left a blank in his mind. He was still as ignorant of the past, from the day he was born to the day he was wounded, as if those days had never existed for him. Even his own name was a mystery to him. Helene had first of all called him Jack, and when they had settled at the old plantation everybody had come to call him Jack Adams, and the name had clung to him.

There was one bright light which illumined his path—surely, the near presence of Helene. She was his idol, his goddess. At her bidding he would gladly have laid down his life. He loved her with the pure and devoted affection of a faithful dog.

Helene, in her turn, had grown up, under Adams' teaching, exactly what Adams intended her to be—fit to enslave men and ruin kings. That she was a beautiful woman no one might have denied, though here was a kind of beauty which recommended itself to all men. Adams had brought her up and trained her to despise men. He had laid open to her every weakness of the so-called sterner sex, and in the result he had fashioned a woman who, if she had a heart, was as hard as steel at every point where love could assail it. The natural untutored girl had become a woman of the world; and though suitors came and suitors went, if she loved anybody, that being was herself.

Adams' success with his pupil was his own punishment. As Helene grew from child's estate to that of woman, the ascetic revolutionist unbent himself to her, and little by little he grew to hunger for that which he had striven so hard to eradicate. Little by little he began to yearn for Helene's love, while he himself had taught her that it was unwise to love anybody. He had never dared to confess to the woman whom he had reared from child's estate that he would have been so happy could he have made her his wife, and when he saw her surrounded by admirers his heart for the first time in his life felt the bitter stabs of jealousy.

Adams was paying but little attention to the papers in front of him, but gazed steadfastly in the direction of the copse of magnolias, where Helene was strolling between the trees by Capt. Denon's side. Walter looked from Adams to Helene and from Helene to Adams with a puzzled inquiry. He had discovered a new trouble. Was Adams in love with Helene as well as all the others who came and departed again? He would be nearer and dearer, if he were accepted, the lady would be harder to bear.

"Denon seems to be in favor," he bustled out after waiting wearily for a while.

"Yes, my poor friend," said Adams, rather enigmatically, "I am afraid he is in favor."

Walter read in the words a confirmation of his fears, and was silent.

Whatever hopes Capt. Denon may have cherished were cut short by the arrival of a young lieutenant with the news that was between the North and South had actually broken out and that Fort Sumter had been attacked. Capt. Denon immediately bade farewell to his cousin and took the first train for Washington.

CHAPTER X.

The next morning Walter Adams, after a hurried breakfast, ordered his negro servant to saddle his horse. He was

the acting adjutant of the regiment during the temporary absence of the regular officer, and it was his duty to present the report every morning at the brigade headquarters, which were located in St. Charles Hotel.

He rode into town at a headlong gallop. Arrived at the hotel, he threw the reins to the negro attendant and walked up the steps. A tall, distinguished-looking old gentleman was standing at the door of the hotel. His pale face was fringed by small silver-white whiskers, and his silvery white hair was combed with a scrupulous neatness. He stared at Walter for a moment and looked at him with nearly frightened eyes. Walter, in his turn, stopped with an amused interest.

"Mr. Walter Graydes?" gasped the old gentleman at last, holding out a hand. "I cannot be mistaken. You are Mr. Walter Graydes."

"Indeed I am not," said Walter, smiling. "Surely I am not mistaken. You are Mr. Walter Graydes, Lord Yorley's son. Don't you know me? I am Mr. Robert Berlinguy."

"Indeed I do not know you," said Walter, pleasantly. "My name is Jack Adams, and I am the acting adjutant of the Louisiana Zouaves."

With that Walter passed into the hotel, and the old gentleman stared after him as if the lieutenant were a ghost who had risen from some cavernous depth to frighten him. Walter settled his business and rode back to the camp. On a sudden a thought gripped his mind.

Walter Graydes! The name sounded familiar to him. Lord Yorley's son. That also sounded familiar to him. Where had he heard the name? He was sure he had heard it before. But where, and when, and under what circumstances? When he reached the house he went straight to Adams.

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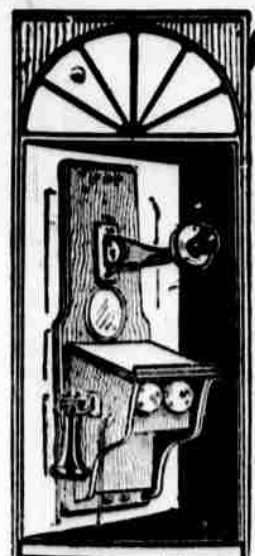
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